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# JOSEPH E. HARRIS:

## *Forging Links on the Diaspora Trail*

6 By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

*At a conference center on the grounds of an old coffee plantation in the small mountain town of Sasaima, Colombia, 27 people have gathered for what is billed as an International Seminar on Research and Teaching in Afro-South American Studies.*

*The event is co-hosted by Howard University's history department and three South American research centers, with financing provided by a grant from the Ford Foundation.*

*Participants include five Howard representatives and Afro-South American researchers, teachers and community leaders from Colombia, Venezuela and Peru. Their purpose here is two-fold: to talk about ways Howard University scholars and Afro-South American scholars can work together in the area of Black studies; and to learn something about what individual Afro-South American scholars are finding as they seek to explore and reclaim their heritage.*



The participants themselves are a study in hues – from the palest beiges to the deepest mahoganies. Yet despite such physical evidence of varying degrees of racial assimilation, they share in their identification of Africa as ancestral homeland. And despite the language barrier which separates most of the North and South American participants (hence their earphones linked up to two simultaneous translation booths), they are united in their commitment to highlight this African connection in their work in academia and in the larger community.

The seminar opens with welcoming remarks by Manuel Zapata Olivella, a Colombian physician, novelist, researcher and lecturer who is a founder of the Colombian Folklore Research Foundation, one of the sponsoring groups. He expresses his hope that the seminar be a true dialogue, one that “will nourish us as teachers . . . in order to reach a new concept of what the presence of Africa means within the context of Latin American culture.”

Affectionately, now, he goes on to introduce “Brother Harris,” the seminar’s organizer, convener and host. Olivella briefly cites Harris’ roles as researcher, teacher, author, consultant, catalyst for international conferences. He then adds, “All these [accomplishments] are a peacock’s feathers. What is important for us now is his presence here.

It is a great joy that through his effort, through his great desire to bring together Blacks from around the world – and in this case, the continent – he has been the driving force behind our finding ourselves here.”

“Brother Harris,” i.e., Joseph E. Harris, professor of history at Howard, steps forward. He looks a trifle amused by the introduction, perhaps because of Olivella’s “peacock’s feathers” comparison. After a gracious introduction in which he takes note of the uniqueness of the occasion, Harris quickly moves to the heart of the matter: placing this particular seminar in Colombia into a larger context. He begins:

“Largely because of the African slave trade, colonialism in Africa, colonialism in the Americas and racial discrimination in Western countries, the concept of Black inferiority entrenched belief that African peoples had no culture and no meaningful history and thereby required the guardianship of European peoples.

“Although serious and dedicated effort by Africans, their descendants and others challenged those views over the years . . . the past two decades have witnessed an intensification of efforts on the part of African peoples to promote their identity and to articulate issues that affect their lives.

“These movements should not be regarded as separatist. Rather, in my view, they represent efforts by African peoples – wherever they live – to become full members of their own societies with the confidence and skills to contribute effectively to the development of their own countries and to share equitably in the rewards of these countries.”

Turning to the situation of Afro-South Americans, he adds, “In most South American countries I have visited there does not appear to be any developed university program specializing in Black history, Black culture, Black social issues. This, then, is the [primary] reason for this seminar, namely to explore the feasibility of collaborative research and training in this area. My hope would be that in time a research component here among descendant Africans would be able to link up effectively with the activities and programs of other such researchers throughout the world. In the past, for instance, Afro-South American participation in international meetings on the African diaspora has been virtually non-existent.”

8 **A**s Harris uses and promotes the concept of the African diaspora, it encompasses three components:

The voluntary and forced dispersion of Africans from Africa at different periods of history and in several directions;

The emergence of a cultural identity abroad without losing the African base, either spiritually or physically;

The psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa.

"Thus viewed," he has written, "the African diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic, ongoing and complex phenomenon stretching across time and geography."

The conference in Colombia, which took place last spring, is one of the most recent examples of Harris' quest to link scholars around the world who have come to regard the concept of the African diaspora as the most appropriate lens through which to view the experiences of peoples of African descent. It is a quest that has taken him over the past two years, not only to Colombia, but also to Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and the Indian Ocean island nation of Mauritius. Previous journeys "on the African diaspora trail," as he describes it, have taken him to still other parts of the world.

Perhaps that's why when some scholars think of "African diaspora" or "African diaspora studies," the first name that comes to mind is "Joe Harris." Consider the comments of a trio of distinguished social scientists:

Elliott P. Skinner, the Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University and a former U.S. Ambassador to Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), calls Harris "the foremost scholar on the African diaspora in the United States" and lauds him for "stimulating interest in that endeavor" (i.e. diaspora scholarship).

John Hope Franklin, the James B. Duke

"I think for any people to achieve they've got to have a sense of worth, a sense that extends beyond them — to their parents, their grandparents, ultimately then to their origins. And this is *diasporic* in the sense that I'm saying all Black people around the world are related to the African experience."

Professor of History emeritus at Duke University, places Harris "out on the cutting edge of the whole concept of the diaspora."

St. Clair Drake, Stanford University professor emeritus of anthropology and frequent writer on the African diaspora, credits Harris with "almost singlehandedly pulling together the African diaspora studies movement." "Since Harris isn't identified with any particular ideological position," he adds, "he's able to pull us all together."

The subject of these testimonials recently took time out to elaborate on his concept of the African diaspora and reflect on his own related work as scholar, teacher and, yes, unofficial international bridge-builder among scholars of the Black experience.

The setting for these interviews was a tiny office tucked under the eaves of Founders Library on Howard's main cam-

pus which Harris uses as a writing retreat. Dominating the space is a large wall hanging from the Ivory Coast, a map of Africa labeled 1590 A.D., a reproduction of a painting of a Black woman cradling colorful peonies and ubiquitous books, most in English, but some in French, Spanish and Portuguese.

And seeming to serve as a nagging reminder of the work he should be doing are piles of papers representing various projects in progress, among them: editing the transcripts of the Colombia conference and drafting a proposal to establish some formal mechanism for collaborative research and training between Howard and Afro-South American scholars; updating his textbook, "Africans and Their History," for Mentor Books; revising two chapters he has contributed to UNESCO's upcoming eight-volume "General History of Africa" (which will have editions in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Hausa and Swahili).

### The Concept

When asked why he thinks the concept of the African diaspora is so important, Harris answers without hesitation, his words racing at fast pace, his hands emphasizing their meaning. And when he says *Africa* or *Africanity*, he invariably places a strong accent on the first syllable, which seems to imbue the words with a special aura.

"Many in my generation of Africanists have felt a need to show the role of Africa in the world," he says. "People had been writing about these 'savage' Africans, the simplicity of African society until Europeans came, how Africans had never quite achieved anything worthwhile, all that. As we began to look more into history and as Africans themselves began to achieve independence and we found that Africans, indeed, *had* achieved, it became important to relate that to descendant Africans who also had been labeled as 'savage' and 'inferior.'"

"It became important, not just to set the record straight, but to build a foundation of pride. I think for any people to achieve they've got to have a sense of worth, a sense that extends beyond them — to their parents, their grandparents, ultimately then to their origins. And this is *diasporic* in the sense that I'm saying all Black people, all people of African descent around the world, are related to the African experience."

He also believes the link between Africa and African descendant peoples has the potential to become a powerful force for the advancement and support of Blacks wherever they live. As an example of this support as it exists today, he cites Trans-Africa's role "in mobilizing Blacks in the U.S. to bring pressure to bear against apartheid and to promote policies aimed at bringing justice and freedom to Blacks in South Africa." He adds: "Black Americans who are demonstrating against apartheid are not people who want to go live in South Africa, are not people who are saying 'We are as culturally a part of South African society as are Blacks in South Africa,' but they are people who can *identify* with Blacks in South Africa. In that sense, they are saying, 'We are an African people.'"

Despite Harris' eloquence, commitment and the high personal regard with which he is held by many scholars, some raise questions about particular aspects of the African diaspora concept he espouses.

There are those, for instance, who object to the term *African diaspora*. Derived from the Greek word for a scattering or dispersion, *diaspora* traditionally has been used to describe the scattering and settlement of Jews outside of Palestine. In the mid-sixties, Skinner, Drake, George Shepperson of the University of Edinburgh and a few others began to use the word to describe the dispersion of African descendant peoples.

Tony Martin, who chairs the Black stud-

"Sure, we have been Europeanized in a variety of ways, but we've also maintained a kind of *Africanity* that is important. And I think we need to remember that and whenever I see evidence of that I'm eager to explore it and to encourage other people to explore it."

ies department at Wellesley College, is one of the opponents of the term. "The term *African diaspora* reinforces a tendency among those writing our history to see the history of African people always in terms of parallels in white history," he contends. "In the old days, other peoples told us we had no history at all; now they acknowledge we have a history, but only in terms of other peoples' history. So, we should do away with the expression *African diaspora*, because we are not Jews."

Harris, of course, disagrees. "*Diaspora* is a generic term," he argues, "and can be used as any other generic term is used. We could spend a good deal of time reinventing terms and expressions, but why reinvent the wheel? I don't know of any other word that has the richness of *diaspora* to describe our experience."

Nor is Harris particularly worried if the word *diaspora* might encourage comparisons of the Jewish experience with

that of African descendant peoples, anyway. "One can be too paranoid about other peoples' experiences," he says. "I think there is a human experience of oppression and struggle and I think such experiences among different peoples often have certain similarities. I don't think we should be afraid to acknowledge these similarities — as well as the dissimilarities."

Another criticism of the African diaspora concept, as Harris defines it, comes from those who believe it encourages a kind of scholarship which pays insufficient attention to how a society's class structure shapes the experiences of African descendant peoples. Listen, for instance, to James Turner of Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center:

"I think, first of all, what Joe has said is, 'Hey, look! The global dimension of the African presence is a very important question. We need to look at it. We need to be constantly aware that African peoples have made contributions in the world and that in many societies they are a significant component.'

"But I tend to hear him say that the area of research he would emphasize would be to look at cultural artifacts and cultural development in these societies, at how, for example, African culture has infused Iberia and all of Latin America. And the next thing would be sort of to look at the outstanding Black figures in the history of these societies. And that's fine.

"But what I think he has not done enough is to look at questions related to the *political economy* of racial status in these societies. And I think that when you do that, what you would tend to find is that one of the other commonalities of dispersed Black people — beyond the fact of African ancestry — is economic exploitation and political powerlessness, which tends to keep Black people at the lowest

10 stratum. And I think the question you have to ask is, 'How is that?'"

But in Turner's view, Harris and those who share his approach avoid raising this important issue. "They tend to move away from the class question," he says, "and talk about the race question."

"I don't want my views to be perceived as some kind of very critical opposition," he hastens to add, "because I've shared with Joe and worked with him and I appreciate what he's done. It's easy for people to say, 'Well, he could do this and he should have done that.' One person can only do so much."

On his part, Harris says, "I don't think to emphasize one's blackness or the Black dimension in the study of our history is to minimize the class approach. When I talk about the African diaspora I say there's a component of it that deals with adjustment abroad, settlement abroad. And in that you've got to deal with the economic aspect and that entails the relationship of these African peoples, as Blacks in white societies, to the means of production and distribution. So then you can apply your class analysis if you want."

"Maybe the source of the problem is that I don't think any *single* approach is adequate. Some may want to talk about class. Some may want to talk about how geographic influences shape a peoples' development. Some may want to talk about still other influences. I think the best history that ultimately will be written of any people will subsume all these approaches. I would say, though, that there's a burden in the reconstruction of Black history: race has become so interwoven with our experience that it's very difficult to untangle."

For him, as he emphasizes again and again, the best history of African descendant peoples is one that acknowledges the centrality of the homeland: Africa. "For a long time," he says, "the prevailing view was — and still is to some extent — that

**"The African diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic, ongoing and complex phenomenon stretching across time and geography."**

the history of Blacks outside of Africa was entirely different from African history, that Blacks outside of Africa were exclusively products of the areas in which they lived. I think that's only partly true. Sure, we have been Europeanized in a variety of ways, but we've also maintained a kind of *Africanity* that is important.

"And I think we need to remember that and whenever I see evidence of that, I'm eager to explore it and to encourage other people to explore it."

### **The Activities**

Among vehicles for this exploration, in addition to the Colombia seminar, have been two international conferences Harris organized around the theme of "The African Diaspora from a Changing Global Perspective." The first was held at Howard's Blackburn Center in August 1979 and the second at Kenyatta International Conference Centre in Nairobi, Kenya, in August 1981, with most of the funding provided by the Ford Foundation and the United States Information Service (then the International Communication Agency).

These conferences, in conjunction with several others organized by UNESCO, are credited by many with helping to legit-

imize the concept of the African diaspora within the international scholarly community.

Papers read at the Howard conference ranged in topic from the general (e.g. "The Dialectic Between Diasporas and Homelands," "The Challenge of African Diaspora Studies," "The African Diaspora in the Context of World History") to the particular (e.g. "Afro-Americans in the History of Zaire, 1884-1921," "International Relationships between African and Black Students in American Universities, 1950-60, and their Effects on African Nationalism and the Black Movement").

One of the speakers at the conference was Herschelle Challenor, a senior liaison officer for UNESCO. In assessing the impact of the gathering, she says: "In that conference Joe was able to bring together scholars who had done significant work in various aspects of the dispersion of Africans throughout the world. And there was an important output of that, that is to say, a book." The book is "Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora," a collection of selected papers from the conference, which Howard University Press published in 1982.

Drake, who also spoke at that conference, believes it was important for other reasons as well. "It was one of the first conferences in a long time where a few white scholars who were working from a Black perspective had been invited and were present," he says. "Previously, there were some sectors among Black scholars who didn't want to have anything to do with white scholars. Bridging that color line was important."

In addition, Drake says, through that conference and the one in Kenya which followed it, "Harris was able to do something which nobody else has had the energy and the contacts, I suppose, to do: he persuaded a number of African colleges and universities to introduce courses in Afro-American studies, just as we give courses

in African studies here."

The conference in Kenya, in particular, featured exchanges of practical information on how African scholars could integrate a diasporic perspective in their teaching and research. Hence, a paper was delivered by an educator from Malawi on "The Classroom Presentation of Common Themes in the History of Africa and the African Diaspora," another from an educator from Zaire on "The Teaching of Black American Literature in Zaire," and one from a Kenyan educator on "Archival Sources on Afro-Americans in Kenya."

As a follow-up to the two conferences, two years ago Harris launched the *African Diaspora Studies Newsletter*, with initial funding provided primarily by UNESCO and the Ford Foundation. Published in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, it acts as an international forum for discussion on issues related to the concept of the diaspora as well as a vehicle for exchanges of information on courses, conferences, curriculum developments, new books, research findings, the itineraries of traveling African scholars and the like.

According to Challenor, the continuation of the newsletter's UNESCO funding is uncertain, "not because of any dissatisfaction with the product, but because of our budgetary problems" precipitated by the withdrawal of the United States from the international agency.

"And that's unfortunate," she says, "because the newsletter has the potential to be the vehicle through which academics — African or otherwise — can stay in touch with not only the research goals of others, but also materials that are turning up in various places which they might not have known about otherwise."

Meanwhile, Harris' informal scholarly bridge-building continues via a lively exchange of letters and telephone calls as well as face-to-face contact.

During one of the interviews for this article, a Sudanese educator in charge of de-

**"For a long time, the prevailing view was that the history of Blacks outside of Africa was entirely different from African history . . . I think that's only partly true."**

veloping and managing a new university in Khartoum dropped by his office during a U.S. Information Agency-sponsored tour. The visitor brought greetings from various African scholars in Africa, Europe and elsewhere in the U.S. and brought Harris up-to-date on some of their activities. In turn, Harris told him about some of the activities which bore his recent involvement — the latest issue of the newsletter, the Colombia conference, this fall's public television series, "The Africans," for which he served as a consultant.

"I've heard so much about you from so many people," the visitor remarked. Looking over Harris' cubbyhole of an office and the absence of any semblance of staff, not even a secretary, he expressed surprise that the Howard scholar wasn't ensconced in more luxurious quarters.

After he left, Harris laughed and said, "A lot of people think I've got an operation going. I don't have any 'operation.' The operation is Joe Harris."

"Joe Harris" is a name known to many Africanists, not only because of Harris' scholarly networking, but also because of his scholarly production. The books and articles he's written and the papers he's read at a variety of national and international conferences over the years repre-

sent another side of his efforts to forge links on the African diaspora trail. Intellectual links. Consider, just, the books.

### The Books

His first was "The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade" (Northwestern University Press, 1971). It evolved out of his experience attending his first international scholarly conference, a meeting of the International Congress of African Historians in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in October 1965. (He was at the time on the faculty of the College at New Paltz of the State University of New York.)

"I chaired a panel on the diaspora," he recalls, "and everyone was talking about the Atlantic slave trade. I raised the question of the East African slave trade, or the Indian Ocean slave trade, which was principally conducted by Arabs. 'What happened to the descendants of those slaves?' I asked. And Arab colleagues, Muslim colleagues, said, 'Oh, those Blacks were all absorbed into the local societies, so you won't find any over there.'"

Harris was skeptical and when he returned to the U.S. he sought information about the East African slave trade and its legacy in various libraries. He didn't come up with much, so he was able to receive funds from a variety of sources to see what kind of material might be available in England, Iran and India. His initial plan was just to identify repositories of material on the subject. But what he found gave him enough information for a book.

"The African Presence in Asia" was — and still is — considered a pioneering effort, but is in no way comprehensive. "I saw it as a seminal work, one that would encourage Eastern and Western scholars to look further into the subject," Harris says.

Concentrating primarily on India, Harris drew on archival materials, oral testimonies and his own observation to docu-

<sup>12</sup> ment the roles African slaves and their descendants played in the societies in which they were thrust. Some of these slaves had been laborers on date plantations and salt flats, others dock workers, sailors on Arab trading vessels, pearl divers, soldiers, guards, servants and, yes, concubines and eunuchs.

Most of these African slaves are now nameless. Some are not. Harris tells the story of Malik Ambar (c. 1550-1626), an Ethiopian who had been sold into slavery and eventually reached Ahmadnagar in central India. He became a commander of a large army for the king of Ahmadnagar and for years was able to stave off attempts by the Mughul emperors to conquer the Deccan, the huge plateau which forms most of India's southern peninsula.

Drawing on his military prowess, Ambar was able to usurp power from the king and establish control over the area around Ahmadnagar. In this area, he founded towns, encouraged the construction of canals, irrigation systems and impressive buildings and attracted scholars and poets to his court, according to accounts of the day which Harris uncovered.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of the book, though, describes an existing intact Indian community of Blacks, the descendants of African troops who had served as bodyguards to the ruler of Hyderabad during the 19th century. The area in the central Indian city where these descendants live is called Siddi Risala — "African Regiment."

In doing research for the book, Harris spent about 10 days in Siddi Risala, a community of some 1500 people whose concrete barracks-like homes cover several blocks. Though they looked "Black," with dark skin, kinky hair and broad noses, most of the Siddis — the term for Blacks in parts of Asia — had little knowledge of recent developments in Africa and knew nothing at all about Afro-Americans, Har-

ris found. Yet he writes that he was able to identify some African cultural retentions in their musical instruments, folk songs, dances and their use of some Swahili words. As Blacks in a non-Black society and as Muslims in a predominantly Hindu society, he also found them to be at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, working — when they had jobs at all — as rickshaw drivers, domestics, cooks, gardeners, porters.

As Harris speaks of his discovery of Siddi Risala, his excitement is still palpable. "Here's something I found that people hadn't paid very much attention to," he says. "Yet from my point of view, it showed a very relevant aspect of African migration."

"Then, too, I'd really proved a point — which goes back to that conference in Tanzania. And that was that these African descendant peoples had *not* all been absorbed in Asian societies or in Muslim societies. Not only had those in Siddi Risala not been absorbed, but they talked about ways Arabs and Muslims and Hindus had discriminated against them. As a Black American, I could identify with that and I could see certain possible implications if additional work could be done to show parallels in the Black struggle."

Harris' second book, "Africans and Their History" (Mentor Books, New American Library and New English Library, 1972) is a compact general African history textbook which is dedicated to two of his Howard University professors whom he considers mentors — the late Rayford W. Logan and John Hope Franklin.

The book sought, first, to debunk the myths and stereotypes which have long interfered with understanding Africa's past, and then, to reconstruct that past through a delineation of some of its broad themes. On the establishment of European colonial rule in Africa, for example, Harris writes:

". . . political and economic domination

were the principal goals of colonial rule, and the European commitment to racial superiority which was part and parcel of the European administrator's approach to Africans was always evident — in dress, language, housing, recreation, religion, and sex. The extent and intensity of racial animosity and conflict varied from area to area and in some cases were concealed under the terms of cultural differences, but behind all facades was the fact of black suppression by Europeans. This psychological factor was probably the greatest legacy Europeans left in Africa, the differences in policies notwithstanding."

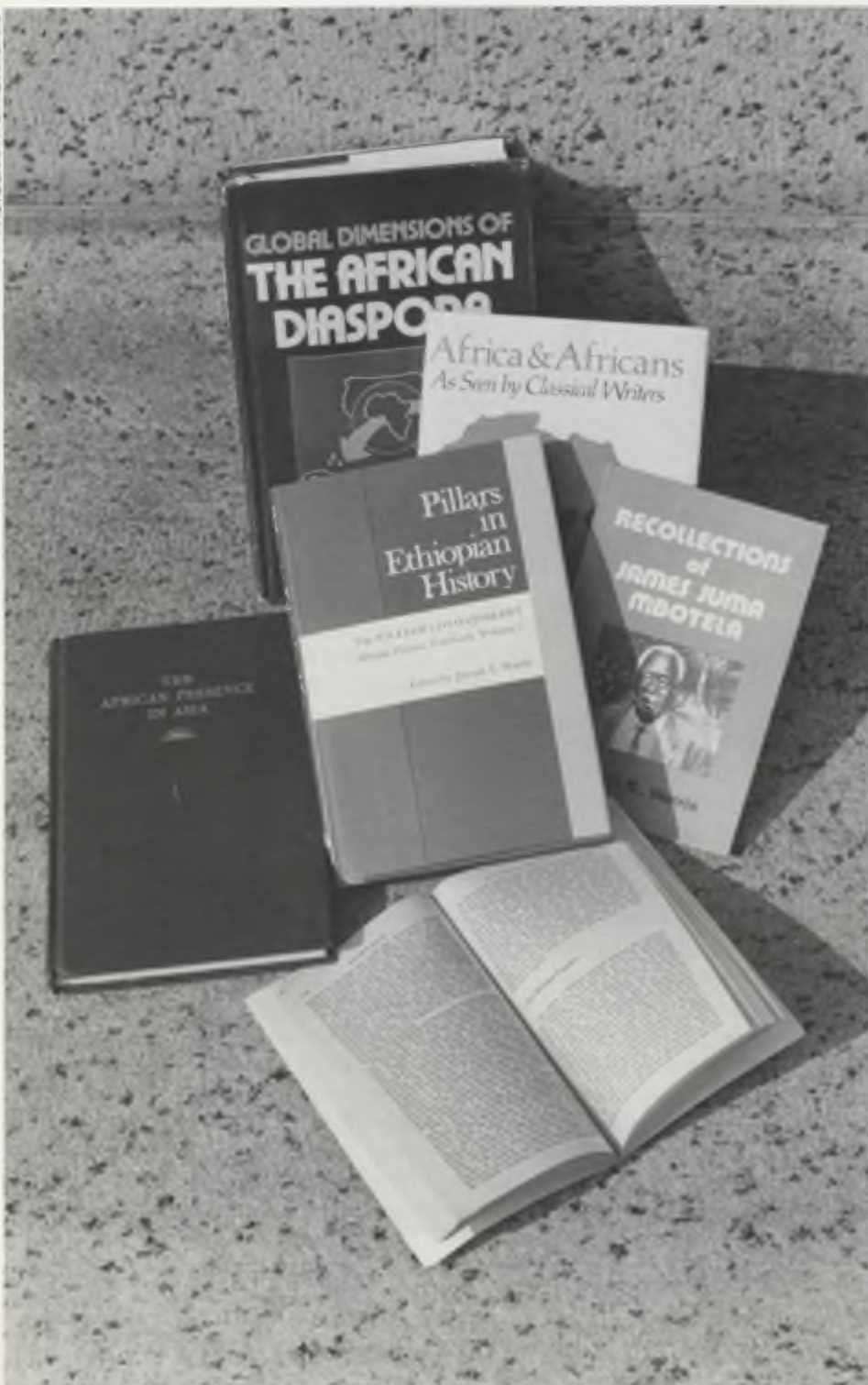
In reconstructing Africa's past, Harris deals with Africa's accomplishments (the advanced cultures represented in the early kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai, for example) as well as Africa's faults. On the touchy issue of African complicity in the slave trade, for instance, he writes: "A minority of African rulers and merchants, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, succumbed to the attraction of wealth and power to the point that they sold fellow human beings into slavery."

"I'm pleased people have said, 'You know, your book is not all praiseworthy,'" Harris remarks. "Because it wasn't written to praise. It was written to reconstruct as close to reality as possible."

"Africans and Their History" was followed by four books for which Harris served as editor: "Pillars in Ethiopian History" (Howard University Press, 1974) and "Africa and Africans As Seen by Classical Writers" (Howard University Press, 1977) are collections of essays based on the notebooks of William Leo Hansberry, the pioneering Africanist who in 1922 inaugurated an African civilization section in Howard's history curriculum, paving the way for the academic discipline we know today as "African studies."

Yet Hansberry never quite achieved academic respectability during his lifetime





(including, it seems, at Howard University). Partly this was because he lacked a Ph.D., though fully developed programs offering the degree in African history didn't exist when he was seeking to enroll in one. Partly this was because of his sparse publications record. And partly — perhaps even mainly — this was because of prevailing prejudices about Africa and Africans which fostered an attitude that African history wasn't quite as legitimate a field of intellectual inquiry as European or American history.

In editing the two volumes, Harris says his prime motivation was simply to make the material accessible. The first volume focuses on ancient and medieval Ethiopian history. The second examines classical references to Africa and its peoples, revealing that the Black presence in ancient Greece was far more extensive than many classicists had acknowledged. [An exception, of course, is Howard's Frank M. Snowden. For a closer look at this pioneering classicist see "Frank M. Snowden: The Unquiet Life of A Master Teacher" in the January 1985 issue of *New Directions*.]

While Harris says he doesn't necessarily agree with everything Hansberry wrote, he also says, "One must acknowledge that Hansberry took a decisive step to teach about Africa as Africa and he sought an *African* point of view. That was very difficult because he didn't have access to a lot of data, he wasn't able to get to Africa until late in his career and he didn't have a community around him that was prepared to discuss what was going on among Africans in Africa."

Harris, who once shared an office with Hansberry at Howard, says he doesn't really consider the pioneering Africanist to be a mentor. Yet there seems a clear echo of Hansberry in Harris. What Harris writes about Hansberry in the introduction to "Pillars in Ethiopian History," for

14 instance, seems to apply to himself as well. Namely:

"He regarded African studies as a necessary means to develop or maintain black pride and confidence in a world dominated politically, economically, and culturally by whites. However, he was by no stretch of the imagination a racist; he believed in racial harmony; but he also believed that a prerequisite for that harmony was a fuller appreciation of the black heritage."

Harris' two other edited collections are "Recollections of James Juma Mbotela" (East African Publishing House, Nairobi, Kenya, 1977) and "Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora," mentioned in connection with that international African diaspora conference held at Howard. "Recollections" is a short account of the life of a modern day griot whose memories provide insights into the changes within one Kenyan community over several generations.

The book combines autobiographical fragments written by Mbotela, with oral testimonies elicited by Harris and a question-and-answer exchange between the two men. According to one reviewer, its format "offers the opportunity of extending the genre of autobiography beyond the small elite that normally has had the egoism to write their own stories and the clout to get them published."

Overall, the reviews of Harris' books have been favorable. Those for "Global Dimensions" show the greatest divergence of opinion, with one critic calling the book "very comprehensive in its treatment of the African continental and diasporic peoples," and another branding it "a hodgepodge . . . a collection of brief and longer essays on diverse themes only marginally related to questions concerning the spread of Africans and African ideas worldwide."

Meanwhile, during the current academic year, Howard University Press is scheduled to come out with a new book by

Harris with his mentor, the distinguished historian Rayford W. Logan, at a 1974 lecture.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SCURLOCK

Harris, "Repatriates and Refugees in a Colonial Society: The Case of Kenya." The book is actually a sequel to his first book, as Harris explains:

"When 'The African Presence in Asia' came out, a friend who was chairman of the history department at the University of Nairobi, said, 'Joe, I read your book and I think some of those slaves who were liberated in India came to Kenya and have been very prominent on the coast.' He invited me to come to the University of Nairobi to look into it and also to teach a course on West African history."

Harris was delighted with the invitation, especially since one of his professional goals had been to teach African history in Africa to Africans. He was at the time a professor at Williams College and was able to get a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship which enabled him to stay in Kenya for a year and a half, along with his wife and two children.

The book which grew out of that experience focuses on Freretown and Rabai, two communities outside Mombasa, which were settled by African slaves who had

been freed in India, those freed from Arab trading vessels in the Indian Ocean and migrants from other parts of East Africa. The story of the two Kenyan communities parallels in some ways that of Liberia and Sierra Leone, the former settled primarily by freed slaves from the U.S., the latter primarily by freed slaves from Britain and the West Indies.

Harris is currently completing the manuscript of a book about another type of diasporic linkage, that between Afro-Americans and Africa, specifically Ethiopia from about 1900 to 1945. The title of the book is "In the Name of Sheba" and the spark that initiated it came in the form of a 1936 telegram he found while working on the Hansberry papers. It was a telegram from the Italian foreign minister to the U.S. State Department about a group of Blacks (including Hansberry) who were trying to rally around Haile Selassie and convince the Ethiopian leader to visit the U.S. (Selassie was then in exile in England following the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. As the leader of an African nation with a long history of independence, he had come

# The Road Back to Howard

to be recognized by many Blacks as a symbol of Black pride and resistance to colonialism.)

When Harris came to Washington to teach at Howard, he sought out the secretary of the group who gave him access to a well-organized file about the group's activities and goals. He then tracked down documents in the National Archives relating to contacts between Blacks in the U.S. and those in Ethiopia and was able to interview people in both countries who had been involved in linkage efforts.

As his research progressed, Harris says, "I found there was a rich history that no one had written about: the first official Ethiopian diplomatic missions to this country (beginning in 1919) and how Blacks responded; the migration of a number of Black Jews from New York to Ethiopia. . . . There are some fascinating stories."

Again, Harris' excitement is palpable. In words and manner, he manages to convey how being a historian, an occupation some regard as "dry," perhaps even "boring," is a lot like being a detective. Both the historian and the detective are in the business of seeking clues, following up leads and trying to make sense out of what they find.

In Harris' case, what he is interested in making sense of is no less than the experience of African peoples through history—those in Africa as well as those who put down new roots in alien lands, contributed to the development of those lands, but still retained—or retain—some sort of ties to the ancestral homeland. . . . *The African Diaspora*.

It's what he was about at that conference in Sasaima, Colombia. It's what he was about on that research trip to Hyderabad, India. It's what he's about in Washington, D.C., U.S.A., homebase for his efforts to link scholars of the Black experience around the globe. □

**H**oward University played a pivotal role in the making and shaping of Joseph E. Harris, historian of Africa and the African diaspora.

In 1955, when he was a graduate student at Howard and was trying to figure out what to write his dissertation on, Rayford W. Logan led him into a classroom in Douglass Hall. There the distinguished historian pulled out a map of Africa, turned to Harris and said, "Mr. Harris, *This* is the continent of the future. So you should pick a topic dealing with it."

Before Logan had pulled out his map, Harris had been trying to decide whether to pursue an academic career in American history, with concentration in Afro-American history, or in African history. But Logan's dramatic declaration helped him make up his mind. A historian of Africa he would be. As a first step in that direction, he wrote his master's thesis on constitutional development in what was then British Togoland (now part of Ghana). Logan was his dissertation adviser.

As a child growing up in Rocky Mount, N.C., Harris had scarcely had any image of Africa. "You'd hear about missionaries going to Africa in church, but that was about it," he recalls. As a Howard undergraduate, he had become far more conscious of Africa. After all, there were some African students in his classes. But still, he says, "Africa had not surfaced to the point where I wanted to make it a commitment as far as a career was concerned." In those days, in fact, he wasn't even sure he was interested in an academic career at all. He thought for a while he might consider law or the foreign service.

But in graduate school, things began to come together for him. And he attributes that in large measure to the influence of some key teachers. Logan, we already know about. But there were others.

Harris was familiar with John Hope Franklin through his classic "From Slavery

to Freedom," but hadn't known the pioneering historian personally. In graduate school, Franklin became his teacher—and was to have strong impact. "Before that," Harris says, "I had never really met or shared time with a Black writer and scholar close-up and I think that exposure began to influence me as to the possibility of an academic life." (On his part, Franklin remembers Harris as "an outstanding student," "a self-starter," "a person not only of clear direction, but of great self-confidence as well.")

"Merze Tate was also an inspiration," Harris continues. "Here was a scholar who had written on colonialism in the Pacific and so on. And I had a seminar on Africa with E. Franklin Frazier and he used to bring books in and talk about them and that impressed me: that he was so well-read."

Surprisingly, Harris never took any courses with William Leo Hansberry. In fact, he was not to get to know Hansberry well until he returned to Howard during the 1958-59 academic year to fill in for a professor who was on sabbatical. He then shared an office with Hansberry and Tate on the third floor of Douglass Hall. And he remembers the man whose papers he later was to edit as "a warm person, a kind person," and one who seemed beloved by students, especially by African students, some of whom later became key leaders in their countries.

In between his time as a Howard graduate student and a junior member of the faculty that one year, Harris spent two years completing the coursework for his Ph.D. in African history at Northwestern University. (It was there, too, that he met Rosemarie Pressley, who was to become his wife of 28 years.)

One of Harris' teachers at Northwestern was the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, who had argued in his book, "The Myth of the Negro Past," that there was a great deal of African continuity

16 extant in Black American culture. E. Franklin Frazier, Harris' former teacher, disagreed. So, in a sense, Harris found himself front row center at a lively intellectual debate.

A highlight of his Northwestern days was a Monday evening seminar Herskovits led at which scholars, African independence leaders, government officials and other public figures conveyed "the excitement of Africa," Harris recalls. The Northwestern experience also convinced him that if he were to make any significant contribution in African history, he would have to go to Africa to do research.

This he was able to do, following that brief teaching stint at Howard and another at then Morgan State College, when he went to Guinea from 1960-62 as a contract teacher for the International Cooperation Administration (which later became the Agency for International Development). It was to be the first of many trips to Africa. Guinea was then in a union with Ghana and he was part of a team sent in to set up language laboratories to teach Ghanaians French and Guineans English.

Of his first experience on African soil, he says, "There were several ambiguities in the situation: here you are landing in the airport and all of a sudden all the people you see are Black and you're part of a team that is white. You're also involved in a transformation that is occurring [from colonial status to independence] and you're not only a part of that transformation, but you're an academic observer of it. . . . But I felt very comfortable there."

He volunteered to go into the interior, living in the region of Futa Djalón, whose historical apogee became the focus of his Ph.D. dissertation. The Kingdom of Futa Djalón was an Islamic theocracy created in the 18th century. It developed into a leading center for commerce and Muslim scholarship and proselytization and waged fierce (eventually futile) resistance to French attempts at colonialization.



To piece together the kingdom's story, Harris examined documents, interviewed residents and others, observed and participated in some traditional ceremonies, all of which made for what he characterizes as "a rich experience."

Back in the U.S., he taught first at Lock Haven State College in Pennsylvania, then at the College at New Paltz of the State University of New York, before he settled in at Williams College where from 1969 to 1975 he was professor of history and directed the Afro-American studies program.

Williams College, incidentally, was the alma mater of his mentor, Rayford W. Logan. It was also, ironically, the place Harris had once worked as a dishwasher at a fraternity house while earning money for college.

He was now back as a tenured full professor and he describes his years there in that position as good ones. The college was well-endowed, its reputation prestigious. His students were bright, his colleagues congenial. The community was a safe and pleasant one in which to rear children and his family was made to feel welcome. And he was absorbing all the ins and outs of what might be called academic gamesmanship — how to obtain grants, fellowships, consultancies, writing assignments — which was to stand him in such good stead later on.

But he says he began to miss frequent contact with other Africanists who found Williamstown, Mass., a bit too far off the beaten track to visit. He also wanted to be in the business of sending graduate students in African history out into the world, and Williams was principally an undergraduate institution. He and his wife were concerned that their children have more contact with Black Americans, since until that time the children's only prolonged experience living in a predominantly Black environment had been when Harris was teaching in Kenya.

Above all, he felt a need for *community*, one made up of people who cared about Africa, were knowledgeable about Africa, and where Africanists, Africans and Afro-Americans were a strong presence. A fleeting smile passes over Harris' face as he says, "The expression I use is, 'I wanted to hear the drums.' And I heard they were beating pretty loudly in Washington."

And so, in 1975, he returned to Howard as professor of history. For six years, he was also chairman of the history department. This semester he became an associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts.

Since Harris has been back at Howard, he's received grants totalling \$273,500 to support a variety of projects from the Ford Foundation, the United States Information Service, UNESCO and the National Park Service. Most of these projects relate to forging international links between scholars of the Black experience. The National Parks Service-funded project was one which involved history department faculty and students in gathering information on Black contributions in American history for incorporation into the agency's educational programs.

Since he's been back at Howard, too, he's been a fellow at both the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the National Humanities Center and a member of that Establishment foreign policy advisory group, the Council on Foreign Relations; served as U.S. representative on the bureau of the International Congress of African Studies and as a consultant to the Fulbright Scholars Program, the Phelps-Stokes Fund's Program for African Civil Servants and the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars, among other organizations.

He's also continued to present papers at national and international scholarly conferences and written articles for a variety of publications, the most recent, a piece in last winter's *TransAfrica Forum* on "Race

and Misperceptions in the Origins of United States-Ethiopian Diplomatic Relations." 17

Meanwhile, each semester he customarily teaches one undergraduate course, Introduction to African History. But most of his teaching responsibilities lie in the arena of graduate education.

One of his former graduate students is Debra Newman, a Black history specialist at the National Archives who wrote her recent Ph.D. dissertation on Black American women who emigrated to Liberia in the 19th century. As her dissertation adviser, she found Harris to be "very open and creative in the sense of getting you to think about several different approaches to your topic," she says. "He was also quite practical in the sense of asking, 'Would there be enough material? Do you have enough to work with?' What I found most helpful about him, though, was that his general knowledge of Blacks in the diaspora was so great that he was always able to tell you what kind of things had been addressed by other scholars and when you were going into totally new areas."

"I think his interest in the diaspora is very real," she adds. "For him, it is almost a sense of mission to document the role of Afro-Americans and Africans in the development of world cultures."

And what better place to pursue that mission than Howard University?

"In retrospect," Harris says, "Howard was the natural place for me to develop scholarship and activities around the concept of the diaspora. The more I looked at what I was doing and at what my contacts in other parts of the world were doing and the more I sensed the interest of students and professors here in affirming a Black identity, the whole idea of linkages emerged much more clearly. And I felt I had to do something about that." □